Deconstructing Army Leadership

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RECENT STUDY at the U.S. Army War College (USAWC) drew interesting conclusions about how the staff and faculty defined leadership, both individually and collectively; for example, the definition of the ideal leader is based on personal and cultural expectations of what each of us believe good leaders should be. Overall, the study revealed a healthy diversity of ideas. As an institution, however, the Army does not embrace this diversity.

Despite the fact that "there is no universally agreed on definition of leadership," the Army seeks consensus on a single hierarchical theory of leadership. This theory is not necessarily the mental model each of us actually applies when entering the Army's leadership echelons. Although current Army doctrine might inform our personal convictions, most of us have developed our own theories of effective leadership, which are heavily influenced by our upbringing, experiences, education, and training.

The Army's beliefs about leadership, and the ones I present here, should not go unchallenged. Being a seasoned military professional is all about acknowledging assumptions and examining alternatives. This introspective process is an excellent method for professional development.

The Affirmative Postmodern Method

The affirmative postmodern research methodology used here—

- Requires all the instruments of traditional criticism and more to deconstruct (identify and criticize) beliefs and assumptions we take for granted.
- Sees the professional's duty as pursuing revolutionary challenges to conventional wisdom.
- Mixes and matches styles to achieve an aesthetic, interdisciplinary approach to research.

- Develops an important creative tension that can lead to transcendence of old ways of thinking because, while postmodern research is informed by traditional research, postmodernists are ambivalent toward it.
- Both celebrates and denies tradition and the myth of progress.
- Emphasizes paradox, irony, eclecticism, and pluralism.
- Suspects paradigmatic consensus as an outmoded value; hence, paradigm consensus is an outmoded goal of social science inquiry; for example, embracing diverse positions rather than synthesizing them.
- Believes that the dangerous dogma of normal science prevents necessary shifting among competing paradigms.

Affirmative postmodern research assumes—

- Certain aspects of the contemporary world can be reevaluated.
- Margins and softer voices can have as much meaning as majority positions or the mythical mean.
- It is possible to transgress propriety, challenge convention, and articulate voices previously silenced.
- ☐ There is a real world that can and should be systematically investigated through coherent and out-of-the-box sensemaking.
- ☐ There is a difference between puzzle-solving (using traditional paradigms and theories to explain phenomena) and innovation (using bold conjecture, controlled by self-criticism).
- ☐ The objective world created by traditional social scientists is really a subjective interpretation.

(These models have been socially constructed; that is, invented by humans, but traditional social sci-

entists tend to forget that they are and that they are value-laden and not objective.)²

The key to this critical discourse is to identify underlying assumptions that might be taken as fact and then argue for alternative assumptions.³ The deconstructive process "look[s] for those spaces where the text is more likely to be submerging 'its other.' It is there that the text is attempting to construct its own 'truth'—where it can be shown to omit, ignore, or devalue its opposite—and where it is likely to contradict its own claims."⁴

Two types of outcomes are possible after deconstruction. One is that the Army's current leadership paradigm will be strengthened because the paradigm held up well to attack. If so, deconstruction will be a reinforcing process, and only incremental changes to the Army's theory will be necessary. We can make quality improvements to understanding the problems at hand within the limits of an incrementally improved theory of effective leadership. The second outcome is realizing that the Army's assumptions about leadership are myths (or are at least socially interpretable and based on conflicting values), and that transcendence to a higher plane of thinking is required to make new sense of the world.

Part of the greater societal paradigm is that we routinely process information to remove paradox; that is, we eliminate "contradictory yet interrelated elements . . . that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously." But, when we conceptualize what the paradox is, the act of conceptualization can serve as a transcendental mechanism—through a healthy dose of organizational dissonance. Transformational change can result from dissonance and incommensurability. We can reach new ways of framing the problems of paradox through synthesis and dialectical reasoning or by accepting paradox as a normal state of organization.

Mirror Images and Circular Logic

The Army's leadership construct, rooted in the assumption of hierarchy, is an example of the stratified systems theory (SST) proposed by psychologist Elliott Jaques.⁶ The essence of the SST is that hierarchy is the best way to organize for accountability and control. Discovering what makes leaders at the top of the hierarchy successful allows one to train and educate successors in those same qualities.⁷ The theory espouses that strategic leaders at the hierarchy's higher echelons have frames of reference that are more—

- Interconnected, sophisticated, and actionoriented.
- Likely to anticipate second- and third-order effects because their frames of reference contain complex adaptive systems (networks).
- © Oriented on the organization's external environment.8

The academe has commented unfavorably on hierarchical theories of leadership because empirical evidence has led scholars and practitioners away

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from assumptions about performance based on age and experience and the need for hierarchical accountability. Indeed, the information available to people who occupy high positions gives them significant advantages over those who do not have access to that information, which produces information asymmetry. Thus, studies confirm that strategic leaders make better decisions, but such studies rely on circular logic; for example, the reason strategic leaders make better decisions is because they are better informed, and they are better informed because they are strategic leaders.

Because the Army *is* hierarchical, it is suitable to theorize about leadership along these lines of thought. This is the reality that SST deals with as a normative and descriptive theory of "what is," but post-industrial organizations do not have much in common with bureaucracies, with their layers of management and stovepiped functional arrangements.

In the 21st century, it is no longer acceptable to assume that a leader's influence on effectiveness is attributable to his position or rank. An understanding of leadership requires a much broader, more complex view of organizational effectiveness. Perhaps the Army's hierarchical view of leadership blinds us to other interpretations. Gary Yukl, a leadership theorist, makes the point that "viewing leadership in terms of reciprocal, recursive influence processes among multiple parties in a systems context is very different from studying the unidirectional effects of a single leader on subordinates, and new research methods may be needed to describe and analyze the complex nature of leadership processes in a social system." ¹⁰

Having invested heavily in its hierarchical interpretation of leadership, in the late 1980s the Army sponsored studies of the characteristics and traits of three- and four-star generals. The studies defined effectiveness in terms of the characteristics of "successful" leaders who had been promoted. In the

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same tradition of research, the USAWC surveyed general officers periodically to determine if officers who were its graduates were effective as a result of the college's efforts to mold them into strategic leaders. Because of this closed-loop thinking, the Army generated a theory of leadership with an obvious mirror-image problem. A leader is said to be effective to the extent that he displays the characteristics of those who are in positions of power (and, therefore, presumed to be effective); this is clearly a case of circular logic.

Army Field Manual (FM) 22-100, *Army Leadership, Be, Know, Do,* is based squarely in the echelons-of-leadership paradigm. ¹² Army leadership doctrine seems flawed in many respects. The hidden hand of the Army leadership paradigm is a traditional hierarchical power arrangement. For the Army's theory of leadership to remain internally valid, the Army must continue to view leadership in the context of a hierarchical organizational design and to disregard alternative organizational designs (for example, more democratic, networked organizations and the much flatter power arrangements that noncontiguous future operations might require).

The assumption that only a hierarchy can produce effective leadership perpetuates the myth that the most senior person knows more than others. As a result, the Army appears to not value learning (except for "subordinates"). Chris Argyris, a guru of executive learning, argues that the Army should change the values "Be, Know, Do" to "Be, Learn, Do." He says executives who think they "know" are ineffective, "not because they have little to learn but because they have a lot invested in appearing not to need to." ¹³

In FM 22-100, the Army's leadership doctrine is poorly linked to the literature it references. No foot-

notes or endnotes provide more detail for serious students of Army leadership issues nor does it provide a pathway for further scholarly inquiry. This is unacceptable at a time when the Army is in the midst of a professional-identity crisis.¹⁴

Army doctrine developers seem to be confused about what leadership is. They define leadership in a unidirectional or managerial way; that is, as a quality associated with position and rank rather than influence with followers. The manager is interested in substantive outcomes (goals achievement, mission performance measures, and allocations of resources). However, leadership is more about symbolic outcomes (sentiments, beliefs, attitudes, satisfaction, values, and commitment). In the managerial view, the organization decides who has positional power. In the symbolic or interpretive view, followers decide who is a leader.

The Army seems to want to present management as a subset of leadership and, therefore, confuses the two. At the U.S. Military Academy, the statement "all officers are leaders" is common. Another example is the common use of the term "leadership position" in the Army vernacular. But the term is oxymoronic. We do not occupy leadership positions; we occupy positions of authority in an organization. We do not know if those who occupy such positions are leaders until followers demonstrate they choose to follow. The adage, "If you think you're leading but no one is following, you're only taking a hike," applies here.

The Army assumes that strategic leaders (those occupying the highest positions and rank) are its most influential members, but this does not guarantee that members of the organization will understand or act on strategic leaders' intentions. That those in a position of authority can control how people make sense of the world (that is, control their cultural beliefs and assumptions) is doubtful. This is an inherent problem with the current top-down Army Transformation process. Army Transformation is dealing ineffectively with cultural transformation.

The Army also implicitly assumes that leadership is transactional in an economic sense. In 1984, political scientist Terry M. Moe published a theory of hierarchy based in principal-agent theory. The principal (leader) interacts with the agent (the follower) by contractual arrangement. The underlying assumption is that both want to maximize the value of the outcome of the relationship. The principal wants something done (has a goal) and employs his advantages over his agents (particularly asymmetry of information) to get them to work toward that goal.

DECONSTRUCTING ARMY LEADERSHIP



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The principal and agents work to settle conflicts of interest and strive toward contractual settlement because both are risk-averse. The principal wants to ensure that the agents are not shirking, so the game of obtaining this result is what organization is about (goal-setting, monitoring, and aligning value systems). The image of leadership that this theory provides might hit close to home for the Army, which uses superordinate goals, strategic planning, and management-by-objectives in its hierarchical political-military structure. Many Army officers say they want subordinates to "buy into the program," as if their mission is to sell the officers' interpretation of reality.

The Army's leadership doctrine has internal validity problems as well. Doctrine stresses the need to calculate strategy, yet it argues that the environment is too volatile, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous to do so. Doctrine espouses a top-down model of leadership—a linear, cause-and-effect approach to strategic planning and execution. ¹⁶ But, many in the nonmilitary literature argue that such an approach is not what really happens (empirically) and

perhaps is not what should happen (normatively).

Army doctrine recognizes effective strategic leadership as the ability to create integrated policies that produce substantive organizational outcomes (goals achievement, mission performance, and allocations of resources). This definition of organizational effectiveness—a result of strategic leadership and policymaking—is inadequate and not suitable to today's hyperturbulent and hyperinterconnected environment. Hierarchical leadership will suffice less and less because more and more the environment demands that the entire organization adapt to it simultaneously. Hyperturbulent environments do not wait for change to trickle down the hierarchy. The process of doing things effectively is dynamically nonlinear. If leadership really exists, it is more likely a mutual process between leaders and followers, with followers sometimes becoming leaders.

With few exceptions, Army leadership doctrine focuses on military operations (in an international political-military context). Junior and senior executives in the military are not expected to change



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Finally, Army doctrine is based on a particle theory of leadership—the belief that leadership can be broken down into component parts, such as competencies, traits, characteristics, and thinking patterns (for example, doctrinal "interpersonal, technical, and conceptual" skills) and analyzed at various levels ("direct, organizational, and strategic"). The Army takes these assumptions for granted, but they can be easily deconstructed. These are culturally biased statements of opinion, not scientifically supportable propositions.

Social science research has failed to produce conclusive, normalized, and statistically significant conclusions about leadership that demonstrate undisputable cause-and-effect relationships. Many unsettled leadership variables exist because the social variables studied are not linear, but recursive (that is, they produce effects, and effects produce causes). ¹⁷ In addition, this sort of quasi-scientific research names the variables ephemerally and with little consistency.

The Army builds training and educational programs around the particle theory of leadership and seems convinced that organizations that receive these inculcated leaders are more effective than they would be without them. The Army measures effective leadership by

asking its current leaders how effective they think they are (based on criteria it assumes to be relevant). This is an intellectual slippery slope. Individuals actually develop leadership evaluation criteria based largely on their own mental models. We do not want leadership group-think anyway. In addition, the Army cannot afford to assume that leadership will solve all problems. Growing evidence supports countervailing positions and

suggests the Army's view of leadership is a romantic one, rather than a matter of fact.

Romantic Myths and the Status Quo

In the 1985 study "The Romance of Leadership," researchers found a significant correlation between the performance of 34 Fortune 500 firms and the emphasis on leadership in articles from the *Wall Street Journal*. ¹⁸ In a second study of dissertations published between 1929 and 1979, the same researchers found a significant correlation between an interest in leadership and hard or good times in the economy. In a third study of general business periodicals (1958-1983), the authors found a significant relationship between economic upturns and downturns and discussions of leadership.

Subsequent experiments revealed that subjects attributed success or failure to leaders rather than to alternative explanations (such as economic conditions), suggesting that society gives credit for high performance to successful leaders and blames low performance on unsuccessful ones. The authors labeled this phenomenon romantic leadership because "observers are prone to overestimate the amount of control that leaders exert [and that overestimation is also] functional for those who occupy positions of formal authority and status."¹⁹

The authors also point out that past studies of leader succession provided little empirical evidence to suggest that a new broom sweeps clean, possibly "due in large part to the lack of variability in the pool of individuals from which both the incumbent and successor have been drawn." Finally, research indicates that external factors affecting whole industries rather than leadership might also affect performance. The authors conclude: "[F]aith in leadership is likely to exceed the reality of control and will be used to account for variance that is in fact uncontrollable." The study demonstrates that the effects of leadership were imaginary or mythical.

Jeffery Pfeffer presents compelling arguments that leadership is only one among other forms of social control.²² Other forms include rewards, sanctions, surveillance, and organizational culture. Pfeffer sees three issues confronting research on leadership.

The first issue is whether or not leadership matters. Studies of executive leader-successors reveal a lack of compelling evidence. A leader's influence on organizational performance is small, and various leadership strategies produced little variance in organizational effectiveness.

The second issue is whether one can learn leadership skills and behaviors. Most efficacy studies are based in student ratings of the learning experience (similar to how the Army measures educational effectiveness). According to Pfeffer, "[M]any of these courses are at a minimum more pleasant than work and often allow students to bond with other members of the class, and each of these effects would also be expected to produce high levels of participant-reported satisfaction with the programs."²³

The third issue is what effective leaders do in terms of specific behaviors and action. Pfeffer observes that the "exercise of hierarchical, role-based leadership is less relevant and the task of building the ability to take coordinated collective action in the absence of hierarchical authority more important." Transformational leadership is arguably more about the leader's interaction with followers and the intangible rewards associated with that interaction. A leader's critical role, then, is to lead an organizational *interpretation* of the ambiguous social reality.

In his 1998 book *Transformational Leadership: Industry, Military, and Educational Impact,* Bernard M. Bass reports some findings that might be counterintuitive to the Army culture.²⁵ Bass does not

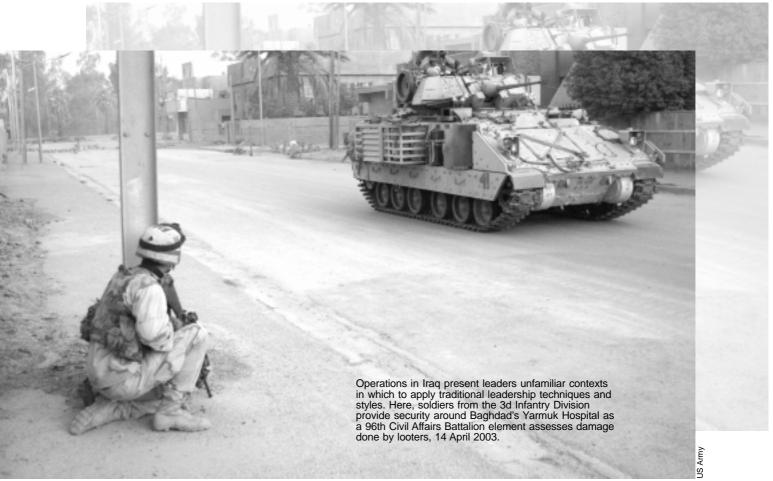
see transformational leadership as being the result of a hierarchical position. No studies attributed higher transformational leadership ratings to hierarchical or rank position. For example, team members with low hierarchical rank might be transformational.

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Gender-related studies reveal women tend to have more transformational leadership attributes than men do. Women tend to be more inclusive, have more charisma, and provide more inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration than men do. Bass concludes that "women have different leadership styles [and] are somewhat likely to be judged more effective and satisfactory as leaders than their male counterparts." He also observes that the characteristics of women leaders are probably better suited for postmodern organizations.

In 2001, Shannon K. Faris and Charles L. Outcalt presented an interconnectedness model that includes a postmodern description of leadership developed from James M. Burn's 1978 Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Leadership* and his ideas on transformational leadership.²⁷ Their concept is "inclusive leadership for the common good" on three levels—individual, group, and society—that might be fostered in more *democratized* (postmodern) organizations. "Leadership is an *influence* relationship among leaders and their collaborators who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes" [emphasis added].²⁸ Faris and Outcalt review some industrial models of leadership that seem to describe the Army's paradigm well:

- ☐ The military model, a Eurocentric, white-male-centered leadership style characterized by hierarchical command and control, can be illustrated by the metaphor of the pyramid and is similar to the "Great Man" theory of leadership—with emphasis on monarchical-style dominance and control.
- The trait model includes personal characteristics or natural tendencies that make up leaders; that is, what the leader *is* seems more important than what the leader *does*.
- The behavioral or style models present leadership as a complex response to situations with



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effective and ineffective practices.

These models also include charismatic and influence-oriented leadership concepts. Post-modernists often criticize these models for being elitist and exclusive. The authors propose alternative images of leadership found in postmodern leadership literature published in the 1990s. Despite the Army's managerial view of the subject, leadership is more accurately—

- ☐ A relationship (not the property of an individual).
- A process.
- About (organizational and institutional) change.
- Something that can be learned.
- Inclusive.
- Collaborative.
- Made up of multiple relationships.
- Oriented toward social change.²⁹

Chris Huxham and Siv Vangen produced a similar study of collaborative leadership that might be relevant to the Army.³⁰ They highlight the fallacy that

"there is a formally acknowledged leader with managerial responsibility and a hierarchical relationship with followers..." In collaborative relationships, there is no formal chain of supervision or leadership within the group. Ambiguity and complexity best describe members' roles. Goals are often ambiguous, complex, and have no clear guidance from policymakers on what the "end point" is. Huxham and Vangen emphasize collaborative structures, processes, and participants and identify three key activities of collaboration:

- Managing power and controlling the agenda; for example, through manipulation and bargaining, empowerment, or reflexivity—the latter meaning challenges to taken-for-granted assumptions.
- Representing and mobilizing member organizations; for example, balancing the dilemma of representing the member organization's needs while playing a partnership role, acting as conduits to the resources of member organizations, and

coordinating commitments.

Enthusing and empowering those who can deliver collaboration aims; for example, building commitment, overcoming geographical barriers, and being assertive.

With the absence of formal rules and power structure, trust—not positional power—becomes the controlling social glue of the group (creating a "virtuous

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circle"). Collaborative leadership is a gestalt of agendas, collaborative structures, processes, and participants and the complex activities they produce.

Gary Gemmill and Judith Oakley sum up their 1992 critical review of research on the traditional leadership paradigm by saying, "We further argue that the major significance of most recent studies on leadership is not to be found in their scientific validity but in their function in offering ideological support for the existing social order. The idea of a leadership elite explains in a Social Darwinistic manner why only certain members of a social system are at the apex of power and entitled to a proportionally greater share of the social wealth. So-called leader traits are woven into a powerful social myth, which while serving to maintain the status quo, also paradoxically sows the seeds of its own destruction by accentuating helplessness, mindlessness, emotionlessness, and meaninglessness. The social myth around leaders serves to program life out of people (nonleaders) who, with the social lobotomization, appear as cheerful robots. It is our contention that the myth making around the concept of leadership is, as [Warren] Bennis asserts, an unconscious conspiracy, or social hoax, aimed at maintaining the status quo."32

Reconstructing Army Leadership

Alternative images can help form a new Army leadership paradigm. Leaders often lead in a nonhierarchical context. Advocating levels of leadership (direct, organizational, and strategic) constrains Army Transformation. The Army assumes

that a hierarchical or bureaucratic structure is necessary, but the Army needs to unsubscribe to the managerial principal-agent theory and drop the levels altogether. Let us not confuse managerial authority with leadership as current doctrine does.

Authority is the character of order in a formal classical realist or managerialist organization. Leadership, on the other hand, is the *informal* social interrelationship between a leader and followers that influences how they share purpose. Leadership seeks unification of symbolic meaning about purpose; that is, the leader interprets or frames the purpose in such a way that followers voluntarily commit themselves to it. This does not mean the Army should exclude a managerial perspective, but it should not confuse management with leadership.

Leadership is holistic. Leadership means leading laterally or collaboratively, and not just from upper echelons. Leadership entails leading the people, the structure, and the process. The level of analysis traditionally associated with individual leaders' traits is overly simplistic. In their review of 20 years of research on upper-echelon leadership, Kimberly B. Boal and Robert Hooijberg argue that the question is not whether leadership matters, it is whether we can determine the context in which leadership takes place.³³ Appreciating the context is infinitely more important to the leader than simply exercising managerial authority.

Leadership is symbolic. Leadership is about the influence of meanings and interpretations that important constituencies give to the organization's functioning. Language and symbolism are primary tools of the leader's trade. The act of leading is a cultural, or sensemaking, endeavor. Karl E. Weick emphasizes that leadership is really the "management of eloquence . . . defined as fluent, forceful, moving expression."34 He warns: "[E]loquence affects sensemaking. And leaders ignore that reality at their own peril. . . . Given the critical role of language in sensemaking, leaders who want to influence the sense people make of their activities must be sensitive to their own words. Followers often appropriate leaders' words and treat them as their own when they try to see what they are thinking."35

Leadership is paradoxical. Leadership in complex organizations and environments requires the acceptance of paradox and seeks the unity of opposites, which can lead to transformational thinking, finding a new paradigm with new explanatory power for processing information. Paradox exists in all organizations and their environments. Army soldiers and civilians need tools to decipher what those paradoxes are and, if necessary, embrace paradox as the way things are. Instead of seeking a consensual, single model of leadership, the Army should embrace

multiple models, even if they seem contradictory.

Leadership is less than or, at best, only equal to other important contributors to effectiveness. Currently, the Army's view of leadership is an incomplete cause-effect myth that perhaps works in combination with other environmental and social phenomena to produce effectiveness. Current research points to other important influences on effectiveness, such as—

- Organizational culture and identity.³⁶
- Organizations as complex adaptive systems.³⁷
- Images and metaphor (the art of framing).³⁸
- Sensemaking in organizations.³⁹
- Building organizational trust as an alternative to formal control.⁴⁰
 - Political contexts and power relationships.⁴¹
 - ☐ The value of paradox and reflexivity.⁴²

The Big Question

If the Army's concept of leadership is the myth that it appears to be, the Army risks defining and trying to solve the wrong problem. The Army seems to think that leadership is the hammer, and every problem looks like a nail. The Army should transcend this point of view and begin to search for a new paradigm or sets of paradigms to make sense out of what it is pursuing in its quest for Transformation. The alternative assumptions suggest the Army needs a more complete paradigm—one that extends beyond the myth of leadership and permits a new image or multiple images of effectiveness.

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The big question might not be, "What does the leader of the future look like?" The question might be, "What does Army effectiveness in the future look like?" The former question constrains the Army's answer to a romantic solution: educate leaders to look like "that," and we can handle anything that comes along. The latter question requires the Army to examine a broader, more complex set of problems.

To find solutions to the problem of effectiveness, we must go beyond the leader's ability to make congruent, consensus-built decisions and policy. We must inject a deeper meaning into the interconnectedness of its educational, organization-development, and other programs in these hyperturbulent times. The Army must find a new frame or set of frames that permits its institutions to teach multiple views of effectiveness. The Army romance of leadership offers a partial and simplistic view of effectiveness. The transforming Army and the Nation deserve a better explanation. **MR**

NOTES

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 37. For the nature of "complex adaptive systems," see Christopher R. Paparone, Ruth A. Anderson, and Reuben R. McDaniel, Jr., "The United States Military: Where Professionalism Meets Complexity Science," unpublished manuscript, 2003.

 38. See Linda Smircich and Gareth Morgan, "Leadership: The Management of Meaning," *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 18, no. 3 (1982): 257-73.

 39. Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995).

 40. See Paparone, "The Nature of Soldierly Trust," *Military Review* (November-December 2002): 45-53.
- 41. See Samuel B. Bacharach and Edward J. Lawler, Power and Politics in Organi 41. See Samuel B. Bachalard and Edward J. Lawier, Power and Politics II Organizations (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980); Henry Mintzberg, Power In and Around Organizations (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Free Press, 1983); Larry Greiner and Virginia E. Schein, Power and Organization Development: Mobilizing Power to Implement Change (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1989).

 42. See Robert E. Quinn and Kim S. Cameron, Paradox and Transformation: Toward a Theory of Change in Organization and Management (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1988).